

# To serve or regret

*Why rotten online service presents such a great business opportunity*

BY JIM CARROLL

**Here's incredible news for Net naysayers:** online shopping *is* hot.

Okay – I'll admit few people actually buy online. But they *are* flocking to the Web to figure out what they want to buy (and to get help with the stuff they already have). In fact, today's customers want to visit a company's website and find the answer to almost any product or service question, almost immediately. When they can't find what they're looking for, they expect to be able to send a question via e-mail – and to receive a fast reply.

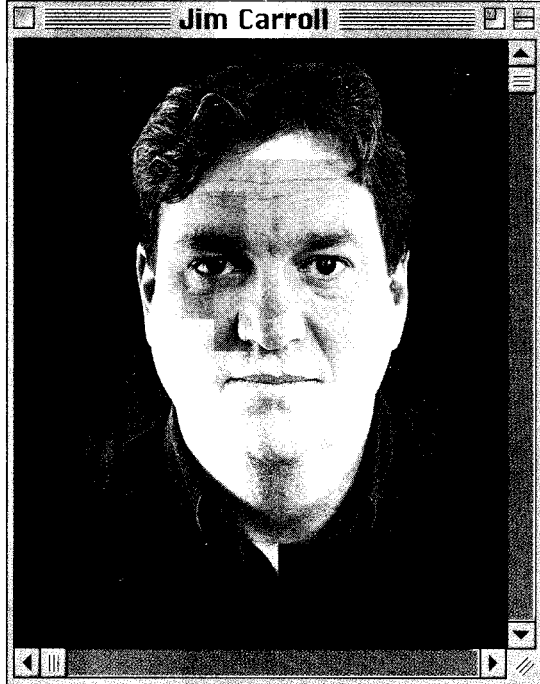
Helping customers online sounds pretty simple, but it's a big problem for business. According to one 2000 survey, most customers expected answers to their e-mail support questions within six hours, yet only 29% of companies responded that quickly. Things haven't improved much since then, and they're going to get worse as more people shop online. But in this challenge is a great opportunity. Any company that delivers strong online support will stand out on the Web and in the real world.

Why don't customers just pick up the phone? In many cases, e-mail is more convenient and saves time. If I don't need an answer right now, I can rip off a quick e-mail and come back to a reply in a few hours. I never have to wait on hold – which might explain why consumers are taking to this medium with a vengeance. It's happening with business-to-business interaction, too. Purchasing managers, for example, are questioning suppliers via e-mail prior to sending out requests-for-quote.

So, customers expect online support – but there are other reasons to offer it. According to Forrester Research, it costs \$33 to handle a telephone support call versus \$10 for an e-mail inquiry. E-mail can also provide clickable links to specific pages on your website, which helps customers take care of themselves. But the real benefit is client retention. In an era of shrinking margins, customer service is the one area where smaller firms have a chance to shine. Online support is the new customer-service battlefield. Win there, and you can win in business.

To ensure excellent online support, you need to:

- Route customer questions to the appropriate employees;
- Monitor the status of all customer queries and quickly clear any backlogs;
- Notify customers their questions have been received, and give them a tracking number in case they need to follow up;
- Cut response times by reusing answers to previous questions;



■ Synthesize and summarize answers to common questions in Web pages, allowing customers to find help on their own.

The last two points are critical, because cost-effective online support is all about “information recycling”. Luckily, some affordable yet sophisticated tools can help you automate this process. A good example is the Web eService Center from RightNow Technologies Inc. ([www.rightnow.com](http://www.rightnow.com)). Its “knowledge engine” actually collects and organizes answers to customer queries in a database that is easily converted into a Frequently Asked Questions summary. The system will even respond automatically to common e-mail questions. Pricing starts at US\$30,000 for a two-year licence.

One of the most interesting low-cost solutions is ReplyMate ([www.replymate.com](http://www.replymate.com)), an add-on for Microsoft Outlook. Priced at just US\$59 for a single licence or US\$1,000 for a site licence, it helps users build a set of answers over time – albeit manually. When you receive a customer question, you simply scan the database for the appropriate response, paste it into Outlook and fire it off.

If these tools are beyond for your budget, then check customer e-mail throughout the day and try to answer all questions within two hours. It sounds simple – but your customers will love you for it.

*Jim Carroll, FCA, is a columnist, keynote speaker and author of 32 books, including Get a (Digital) Life: An Internet Reality Check. You can find his website at [www.jimcarroll.com](http://www.jimcarroll.com) or e-mail him at [je Carroll@jimcarroll.com](mailto:je Carroll@jimcarroll.com)*

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